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Crossing the Caste and Ethnic Boundaries: Love and Inter-marriage Between Madhesi Men and Pahadi Women in Southern Nepal

Chudamani Basnet and Ratnakar Jha

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- 1 Marriages in Nepal, much like in the rest of South Asia, are overwhelmingly endogamous and the decision of parents and kin takes precedence over individual choices and desires (Donner 2002; Goli, Singh, and Shekher 2013; Mody 2007; Uberoi 1998; Vaid 2014). Such traditional marriages are often called “arranged” or “family-arranged” marriages.¹ In recent decades, new forms and practices of marriage—love marriages and love-arranged marriages, for example—are beginning to emerge among the younger generation. In a love marriage, the couple usually “falls in love” and more often than not starts its married life without parental consent. Love marriages occurring within a caste or ethnic group sometimes get approval of the parents and social acceptance, leading to what scholars have termed a love-arranged marriage or arranged love marriage.
- 2 When the couple crosses caste and ethnic boundaries, however, parents and kin often take it to be transgression of family and community values. Interfaith marriages, similarly, face severe problems (Dasgupta 2007; De Neve 2016; Verma and Sukhramani 2017). While recognizing different forms of marriage, classical Hindu texts and oral traditions in South Asia depict love marriages as instances of transgression that threaten group solidarity (Orsini 2007). Since intercaste and interethnic courtships and marriages complicate the mechanism of the social reproduction of caste system, patriarchy and unequal gender relations, parents, kin and communities fiercely resist

these practices despite the fact that the caste system has been officially abolished for a long time. Family honor and prestige are thought to be at stake when a couple, especially a woman, makes an independent marital choice (Chakravarti 2005; Chowdhry 2004; Grover 2009; Mody 2002). Cases of intermarriage thus offer a unique opportunity to investigate emerging subjectivities and agency among the younger generation. Narratives of love and intermarriage also offer a commentary on the rapidly changing economic, social and cultural landscape of South Asia.

- 3 This paper, based on research in southern Nepal, examines the ways *Madhesi* (plains dwellers) men and *Pahadi* (hill dwellers) women enter into courtship and negotiate their marriages.² It also examines the social processes that contribute to the success or failure of the couples to persuade their parents to accept their mate choices. The Madhesis in Nepal speak one of the north Indian dialects while the Pahadis speak the dominant Nepali language and are of Hill origin. Although both the communities are Hindus, activist and scholarly accounts often describe them as “culturally distinct” (Gaige 1975; Guneratne 2002; Jha 2014; Yadav 2010). Language, dress, food, and rituals are often cited as the markers of cultural difference. Further, Nepal’s southern plains are often thought of as an “extension” of the Gangetic plains, and the religion and culture practiced by the Madhesis are usually depicted as more “conservative” than those of the Pahadis (Bista 1991; Gaige 1975).³ In contemporary Nepal, the Madhesis have been fighting for greater ethnic rights and autonomy, and conflict between the two communities has been reported since the 1950s. Inter-ethnic relations have further deteriorated, in recent years, following a series of protests by the Madhesis beginning in 2007.⁴
- 4 In this paper, we document how, despite the seemingly unsurmountable cultural and political differences, Madhesis and Pahadis of the younger generation cross ethnic boundaries by entering into courtship and marital relations. We argue that new forms of subjectivity emphasizing individual choice and agency have begun to emerge among the younger generation in Nepal. The new subjectivity has unfolded in tandem with structural transformations of the economy, the state, and the culture. These transformations, in turn, have given rise to and sustained new cultural forms and practices. Courtship and intermarriages between Madhesis and Pahadis that we describe in this paper should be understood as part of the structural and agentic transformations that Nepal—and South Asia in general—have experienced in recent decades.
- 5 As Nepal’s economy stagnates, migration has become an inescapable reality for many who aspire to a decent standard of living.⁵ “Modern” education has become widespread and given rise to new social and cultural powers. Nepal’s adult literacy rate in 2011 was about 66%, a dramatic increase from 1951 when the adult literacy rate stood at a little over 5%. The Nepali state has played contradictory roles in the subjugation of women (Tamang 2000), but its acceptance of the legal autonomy of the individual empowers the educated younger generation, both men and women. In the cultural sphere, Nepalis are bombarded with late capitalist narratives of development, equality, freedom, choice, and self-fulfillment like never before. With growing literacy, the spread of new media such as movies, novels and the Internet affects the way the younger generation envisions life choices and cultivates new desires. As we will discuss later, these recent changes often result in intergenerational misunderstanding and the same changes give rise to new social practices and forms such as courtship and self-arranged marriages.

- 6 Although intermarriages have existed for a long time in Nepal, only a few studies have examined them (e.g. Caplan 1977; Yamamoto 1983).⁶ Still fewer have investigated recent intermarriages based on romantic love and courtship. In her study among the Magars in a village in western Nepal, Ahearn (2001) has observed that simultaneous to the growth of female literacy, the practice of romantic love and self-chosen marriage first appeared in the 1990s. She argues that an individualistic personhood is taking root among the younger generation. She further associates the new personhood with the rise of democracy and the development discourse. Agreeing with Ahearn's conclusions, we show that the younger generation's narratives of love, marriage and family bear the marks of an emerging, new subjectivity.
- 7 In contemporary Nepal, economic independence is the major means through which members of the younger generation exercise their agency. Education also offers them a moral high ground and critical social resources. Consequently, the younger generation tends to prevail over their parents when it comes to making important life choices such as courtship and marriage. It does not, however, mean that they exercise free agency and choice; their selves are still embedded in the larger family, kin and community networks (De Neve 2016; Grover 2009; Kishwar 1994). Socio-economic status and class position compensate for traditional barriers to some extent, but only for a few. Entrenched social and cultural practices, such as caste and dowry for example, continue to exert influence over them. For women, intermarriage is a mixed blessing in that they may exercise free agency to some extent, but traditional gender power relations continue to shape their social relations and material well-being (Grover 2009; Kishwar 1994).

Research Methods

- 8 This research is based on interviews conducted in Sitapur, a historical and religious town in southern Nepal.⁷ The second author has lived in the research area for several years and the respondents were identified through personal contacts. We focus on cases of intermarriage in which Madhesi men have married Pahadi women since we did not come across any case in which a Pahadi man had married a Madhesi woman. Some respondents suggested that "greater control" over women in the Madhesi community and their relatively lower geographical mobility into the northern Pahadi regions might explain why there are no intermarriages between Madhesi women and Pahadi men. In addition, within the research area, the Pahadis are a minority group, which could be the reason why we could not identify cases of intermarriage between Pahadi men and Madhesi women. It is possible that such intermarriages exist in other parts of Nepal, where favorable demography exists. All Pahadi wives in our study came from outside Sitapur.⁸
- 9 This study is based on 12 interviews—7 Madhesi men and 5 Pahadi women from 12 couples. Interviews were conducted in Nepali, Hindi and Maithili. The marriages had taken place before and after the Madhesi movement of 2007. We also spoke to some of the couples' parents, relatives and neighbors. The research was conducted at the end of 2016 and early 2017. All the couples, except in three cases, were in their 20s when they initiated courtships. Barring three women, who had completed 10th grade, all of them had college education; all the men and two women had salaried jobs at the time of courtship. Two of the men held considerable land in the plains; the rest came from

“middle” or “lower middle class” backgrounds. All the respondents are from middle-to-high caste background. No Dalits were involved in the courtships and intermarriages we describe in the following sections.

Courtship and Romantic Imagination

- 10 The courtships we describe in this paper are different from the ones usually idealized and found in the West (cf. Kishwar 1994); the couples here entered into courtship as a sure path to marriage. They were, however, well aware that their parents, kin, and community would oppose their relationships. How and why did they choose to cross the caste and ethnic boundaries? The answer lies in a complex interplay of cultural and material factors. As other researchers have noted (Basnet 2015; Liechty 2003, 2010), our respondents repeat the staple discourse of late capitalist modernity—self-initiative, choice, and self-fulfillment, but as we hinted above, these individuals did not merely copy Western forms; theirs was a case of complex articulation of the global and the local (Liechty 2010; Rankin 2004). In this articulation, local cultural constructs and stories are as important as global narratives of freedom and choice.
- 11 Economic change in Nepal is one of the major forces which has sent ripple effects across social, political, and cultural landscapes (Basnet 2015; Mishra 2007, 2009; Shrestha 1990). Change came rapidly after Nepal embraced a market economy in 1990. With the rapid breakdown of the traditional agriculture-based rural economy and the growing importance of the market in daily life, people increasingly find themselves in need of cash income. As Nepal’s economy stagnates, ordinary people in recent decades, have become dramatically mobile in their search of non-agricultural jobs (Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung 2002).⁹ The vastly increased mobility means that the probability of meeting someone from a community other than one’s own increases, especially in migrant-heavy urban locations (Caplan 1977; Grover 2009). Migration also involves being away from one’s parents, close kin as well as community members who otherwise could police behavior. Further, urban areas and new institutions such as schools, colleges, and workplaces provide scope for anonymity and courtship.
- 12 Madan, a Sitapur resident, for example, fell in love with Maya, daughter of his Brahmin Pahadi neighbor, who had come to the area with her father, a government official. In another case, Shyam, a Yadav from Dhanusha, was a teacher at a college in Harinagar in eastern Nepal when he met his future wife Sarita, who had come to study in the college from a nearby village. Similarly, Pubai, a Pahadi Newar woman, who married Punya, a Madhesi Teli man, met her husband when they were working at a factory as migrant workers in Malaysia. Punya came from Sitapur and Pubai from one of the Hill districts close to Kathmandu. These cases show that changes in livelihood, i.e., wage labor outside the traditional agricultural sector, was crucial in facilitating the meeting of the couples. Some had gone to new urban locations for higher education where they met their romantic partner. Migration and migrant locations, thus, become crucial spaces for new practices. As Sharma (2008) argues, many Nepali migrants see migration as an escape not only from their difficult socio-economic conditions but also from cultural circumstances. Many thus perceive and experience migration as an “opportunity” to experiment with new cultural forms, practices, and consumption.
- 13 In the Madhesi community in southern Nepal, there are complex stereotypical images of Pahadi women, who are thought of as “argumentative,” “assertive” and

“independent.” It is not the case that everyone takes these stereotypical images positively, as we will discuss later, but the younger generation of Madhesi men, on the whole, value these qualities positively. In contrast, Madhesi men consider Madhesi women meek, shy, and dependent.¹⁰ They often criticize their own Madhesi society and culture, which “subordinates” women, and regret that they cannot do much to improve the situation since they feel their “community” is “backward” and is still powerful with regard to enforcing “traditional” norms. Thus, their selection of Pahadi women as romantic partners and future wives was quite conscious and deliberate.

- 14 Shyam Narayan Thakur, who has worked in several hill areas as a teacher, summarized his “findings” about the Pahadi women in this way: “Pahadi women are more powerful and bolder than Madhesi women...They are even stronger, bolder, and smarter than Madhesi men!” He then narrated, by way of example, how the Pahadi wife of a Madhesi man in a Tarai town successfully took her “evil” step mother-in-law to court in a property dispute:

Raj Kishore [the husband] couldn't have gotten his fair share of property if he had had a [meek] Madhesi wife...Pahadi women are a *Dabangg* (bold) type...Now you see the benefits of marrying a Pahadi woman!

It is interesting that Thakur draws on the popular Hindi movie *Dabangg* to make his point. Thakur's stereotypical image of Pahadi women as strong is widely shared by Madhesi men we spoke with. According to another Sitapur local, who supported intermarriage with Pahadi women: “*Paharniya anle ghar, Dukhh Jetau Sab Tar*” (a Pahadi wife ensures that there are no more sorrows). Mithun, Health Assistant at a local health center, who is “happily” married to a Pahadi woman and whom we will meet again later in the paper, opined that Pahadi women were “50 years ahead of Madhesi women.”

- 15 Madan, whom we met in Sitapur, said that he was first attracted to his future wife because of her “beauty” and “fair skin.”¹¹ Madan then goes on to narrate in Hindi, laced with Maithili, that “*wo filmo me kethte hai na pehli nazar me pyar hogya* (as they say in the movies, I fell in love with her at first sight)...” Taking a subject position as represented in popular fiction and Bollywood movies, Madan here denies his own active agency and emphasizes the well-known cultural trope—love at first sight—to make sense of his personal choice and experience.
- 16 Similarly, Mithun, a Sitapur resident from a Teli caste background who was married to a Pahadi woman, said that he was impressed by her “personality.” When asked to clarify what he meant by personality, he said that he liked her “*chulbula* (playful) character...she had a bright and bubbly personality.” Here, too, the connection between Mithun's choice and popular Bollywood romance movies is evident. Mithun here idealizes a “bubbly” wife rather than an obedient and faithful one.
- 17 Both Madan and Mithun's choices would not have made much sense merely one or two generations earlier. The circulation of movies and romantic texts have been crucial for these new cultural practices, desires and rationales on Nepal's road to modernity (Ahearn 2001; Liechty 2010). It is not that the popular media forces people to act in a certain way, but it offers the language and an imaginative space through which young men and women can enact their choices and make sense of their lives (Liechty 2010). By enacting their personal choices, these youths herald a cultural shift in the very idea of personhood and reconfigure the practices of marriage and kinship.

- 18 The commitment toward marriage was not, however, solely based on the fact that the couples had found their “true” love; these experiments and relationships unfold in the context of the new political and economic reality (De Neve 2016; Kishwar 1994). When we asked Pubai, who comes from a lower middle class background, for example, what she liked about her would-be husband, she said, “*I saw a bright future with him as both of us were earning.*” By bright future, she means a life with few physical hardships and which ensures regular cash income from non-agricultural sources. A Madhesi businessman and trader, who was married to a Pahadi woman from Kathmandu, said that the “frankness” and “outgoing” personality of Pahadi women were the qualities he admired the most in them. He drew on popular movies and stereotypes to make sense of his decision, but he also meant that his Pahadi wife was more *helpful* in his profession than a “shy” Madhesi woman would have been. We, thus, see how the decisions of these couples, in part at least, unfold in the context of economic changes.
- 19 Since Shyam, the college teacher, also had political ambitions, he conceded that marrying an educated and politically active woman served his life goals as well. While giving reasons for choosing a Pahadi wife, he said that he had never seen any *active* Madhesi woman like her in his life. Both were committed to the same political ideology, but marrying a Pahadi woman leader also potentially improved Shyam’s access to the Pahadi-dominated politics. Madhesi men in our research thus thought that Pahadi wives would be economically and politically more helpful than Madhesi ones. With the stereotypical images of Pahadi women in mind, most Madhesi men often dreamed of a secure future in a new political and economic context. In the end, a combination of new courtship culture, material necessity, and stereotypical cultural constructs triumphed over ethnic divisions, but it was far from a smooth ride.

Pathways to Marriage

- 20 As noted above, the couples entered into courtship with marriage in mind. They were prepared to break free from their parents and begin their family lives on their own “if necessary.” In their narratives, they emphasized personal choice and self-fulfillment. However, these young men and women, as earlier authors have also noted in the Indian context (De Neve 2016; Grover 2009; Mody 2007), felt obliged to consult and seek approval from their parents and close kin because they thought “it was our culture”; “our culture” also meant confirming to the norms of patrilocal residence and the extended family.¹² Women followed the same norms, but the issue was less pressing for them since they were *supposed* to leave their natal homes *anyway*. The fact that all of our respondents broached the topic of their marital choice with parents, itself is a sign of the change South Asian society is undergoing, but when the parents first heard the proposal of intermarriage from their sons and daughters, they universally opposed them on the ground of caste and cultural differences, according to our respondents. Barring two cases where the parents attended the wedding rituals, the couples chose to elope in the end. They faced unexpected problems and marshalled a variety of resources to negotiate their marriages, as we discuss shortly, but the power of the younger generation in a new social, economic and political reality is the key to understanding the eventual parental compulsion to accept the marriages.
- 21 When Pubai telephoned her parents from Malaysia to inform them about her intention to marry Punya, the Madhesi man of her choice, her father’s response was crisp and

clear: “If you marry that Madhesi man, then forget us for the rest of your life.” Punya’s parents also rejected the proposal on the ground that Pubai was not only a Pahadi woman but also came from a “lower” Newar caste.¹³ The couple then eloped. Punya’s parents begrudgingly welcomed the couple into their home after a few months, but Pubai’s father has not still accepted the relationship.¹⁴ Her relationship with her parents-in-law continues to remain strained years after the couple got married.

- 22 Rajiv’s parents too rejected his proposal because they thought there were “cultural” and “communal” differences between the two communities. The woman’s parents also vehemently rejected the proposal. Rajiv and the woman then eloped. His parents accepted the marriage after a few months, but the woman’s family members did not contact her for about one year. Eventually, her family accepted the relationship. Unlike Pubai, the couple are now on good terms with their in-laws on both sides.
- 23 When couples elope, parents of the women, taking advantage of legal gaps and ambiguity, often press charges of kidnapping and abduction in South Asia; there have even been cases of “self-abduction” and “staged-abduction” (Chakravarti 2005; Chowdhry 2004; Mody 2007). Madan, who was in love with Monita, a Pahadi Brahmin woman, went through a similar experience when they eloped. The woman’s father, who was an employee at a local government office, filed a police case accusing Madan and Madan’s family of kidnapping his daughter. The police went after Madan’s family members and his father had to go into hiding. After five months, Madan and Monita returned to present themselves at a local court, which dismissed the charges. Madan’s parents eventually accepted the couple, but his wife’s parents have not.
- 24 In this case, the Nepali state, which recognizes adults as “autonomous” moral agents, helped Madan and Monita. Indeed, all the couples were aware of their legal rights when they entered into courtship and this awareness was one of the reasons why they entered into courtship in the first place. In India, researchers have documented largely negative roles of state agencies and officials (Chakravarti 2005; Chowdhry 2004; Mody 2007). Indian experience may be applicable to Nepal in cases in which one of the parties involved is Dalit. But so long as non-Dalit castes and ethnic groups are involved, it is rare that Nepalese face severe problems with the police and courts. This issue needs further exploration, but it may be because Nepal has a long, legalized history of hypergamy between so-called “clean castes” and hypogamous marriages at least among the Hill communities, are increasingly accepted by parents and larger society (Basnet 2015; Caplan 1977).¹⁵
- 25 In addition, social resources are also important. When Naresh, a local dance teacher, fell in love with Nandita, a Pahadi woman, he knew that parents on both sides would oppose the relationship. He started to follow an austere life and save money in whatever way he could. Two years into the relationship, the woman’s parents started looking for a groom for her. The couple then eloped, but Naresh ran out of his savings in a few months. At this point, according to Naresh, his cousins and brothers came to his rescue. They not only provided him with money for months but also convinced his parents that “in this *modern* age, caste and community should not come in the way of marriage.” The man’s parents eventually accepted the couple into their home, under pressure from the younger generation, but the parents of the woman continue to ignore them. Here the younger generation prevailed over the parents’ generation in a rather direct way.

- 26 At the other extreme, we encountered cases in which couples succeed in taking their parents on board and the parents actually participate in the wedding rituals. Shyam's case was relatively easy. His parents and family members relented to his wish after some initial resistance. The woman's family too accepted the couple. Even though family members from both sides attended the wedding rituals and ceremonies, it does not mean that the process was free of problems, as we will discuss later. In Mithun's case, the woman's parents accepted his proposal rather easily. But it was not easy for him to convince his own father. Mithun, like Naresh, discussed above, then used his social resources. He sought the help of his sister and *jijaji* (brother-in-law). His sister and *jijaji* were young and educated, who could understand Mithun's *feelings*, predicament, and the changing ethos of society, according to Mithun. His *jijaji* told his parents that "since Mithun is earning and living his life on his own, family should respect his decision and desire." Eventually, Mithun's parent gave in on the condition that the wedding rituals be conducted in the traditional Maithili style.
- 27 We thus see that only two couples could convince their parents on both sides to attend their weddings; but those parents who rejected intermarriage and did not attend the wedding rituals could not hold their ground for long. Parents of the groom eventually "accept" the intermarriage although the acceptance takes different forms and comes with a cost especially for the bride. Here is how Punya's father, i.e., Pubai's father-in-law, expressed his displeasure at his son's defiance:¹⁶

Please let's not talk about these *kuputhas* (derelict sons) who don't care about their parents and marry according to their personal whims. A son is good so long as he performs the duty of a son...You will never understand how it pains when your son goes out of control.

The statement shows how unhappy Punya's father was about his son's intermarriage as he constantly used the term *kuputah* to describe his son's disregard for parental authority and wishes. His mother too was unhappy. Since the couple met in Malaysia, she regretted her decision of sending him off to a distant land: "If I ever could have imagined that he would bring this "*gara ke ghegh*" (something that has got stuck in the throat), I would not have allowed him to go to Malaysia in the first place." The reaction of Punya's parents also shows how helpless they feel in the face of their son's defiance.

- 28 The relative power of the younger generation vis-à-vis their parents is important in the process of marriage negotiation. As we noted above, education and jobs empower the younger generation in an economy in which the traditional sources of livelihood give diminishing returns and prestige (Basnet 2015; Mishra 2007, 2009). According to Pubai, her husband's parents were "compelled" to accept them into their home since "he was the only son in the family who had a regular salaried income." Similarly, Tina said that because her husband was "educated" and had a permanent government job, they could get married against their parents' wishes and the parents eventually accepted their marriage. Shyam was a permanent teacher at a college when his parents agreed to participate in his wedding rituals. As Shyam recalled, "I was the most *respected* person in my family...generally speaking, people hardly opposed what I said and did because I was a highly *educated* person."
- 29 Education is not simply a means to a salaried income but it also carries moral authority in the eyes of the parents (Basnet 2015, 2017). The metaphor of "light" is often used for modern education in contemporary Nepal. In this discourse, illiteracy and lack of education are depicted as "darkness" and "ignorance." Thus the parents felt obliged to

listen to those who lived in the age of light. Education also generates concrete social resources as we noted above. Young men often turned to their networks of educated siblings, friends, and relatives to influence their parents. Finally, the younger generation is further empowered by the state since despite its contradictory roles to subjugate women (Tamang 2000), and many failures to live up to the constitutional ideals in South Asia, the state is constrained, even if superficially, to respect the decision of “autonomous” adults, as the victory of Madan and his wife at the local court showed.

- 30 The power of the younger generation and the wind of change in general is described by this Madhesi man who has been “happily” married to a Pahadi woman for 45 years:

Now people like us [those who had married Pahadi women long time back] made the life of the younger generation easier. One can't even imagine the difficulties we faced then...I had to leave my parents and go to Mumbai for a job...I was absolutely abandoned by my parents and kin. Now parents do not abandon their children because of intermarriage; children themselves abandon the family if the parents do not accept the marriage! Can you see the change now?!

- 31 This Madhesi man underscores the change in power relations between the parents and their children. He repeatedly noted the broader cultural, economic, and social change the Madhesi community has undergone in recent decades and how the younger generation has been able to impose their will, even if partially and unevenly, on the parental generation.

Caste, Culture, and Class

- 32 Why did the parents universally oppose the intermarriage of their children? The obvious answer is “cultural differences.” Both scholars and activists prolifically discuss cultural differences between the Madhesis and Pahadis in Nepal (Gaige 1975; Guneratne 2002; Jha 2014; Yadav 2010); the list of differences often includes language, dress, food, rituals, and so on. But in the interview narratives, the usual items of differences did not show up as the most prominent. When they did, our interviewees did not think that they were insurmountable as the participation of parents in the wedding rituals of Mithun and Madan, discussed above, shows. The fact that both the communities are Hindu bridges the gap to a large extent. The concern for culture, however, came in varying degrees in three major forms—caste, dowry, and the role of the daughter-in-law.¹⁷ But as we demonstrate shortly, class seems to complicate the power and influence of culture.
- 33 According to our respondents, the parents and the older generation in general insist on the policy of “community first.” Since intermarriage upsets the “naturalness” of caste, culture, and community, it is not difficult to see why a section of any society disproves of intermarriages. Intermarriages put a question mark on the very mechanism of the reproduction of caste and patriarchal ideals (Chakravarti 2005; Chowdhry 2004; Dumont [1970] 1999; Grover 2009; Mody 2002). Our older generation respondents in Sitapur often differentiated between *dulhin* (the legitimately married) and *urha-ri* (one married through elopement). As several studies in India have shown (Grover 2009;

Kishwar 1994), the former commands a higher status and prestige than the latter. The problem gets worse if the couple belongs to different castes and communities.

- 34 Although caste hierarchies among upper and middle “clean castes” in Nepal have blurred considerably in recent years (Basnet 2015, 2017), caste still plays a powerful role in society. Caste thus becomes a serious issue for most parents. In Pubai’s case, the problem of her Pahadi status was compounded by her “lower caste,” since the Newar Shresthas, according to her father-in-law whom we interviewed at length, ate buffalo meat, a practice associated with the “untouchable” *Chamars* of the plains.¹⁸ Recent studies in India suggest that food continues to become a matter of concern and gossip in cases where the caste background of the bride is ambiguous (Chaudhry 2018). Rajiv, on the other hand, faced the opposite problem. The woman’s parents thought that he came from a “lower” Kayastha caste background.¹⁹
- 35 It is, however, wrong to interpret caste beliefs and practices in terms of some deep “conservative” religious sentiments alone. Parents were often fearful of negative reactions from the community and wider kin members, who provide them with social and emotional support. As Chaudhry (2018) also observed in her recent study in north India, parents in our study were concerned about the consequences of their son’s intermarriage for the fate of their unmarried sons and daughters. According to our respondents, it becomes difficult for parents to find a “suitable” bride or groom for their unmarried children from their own community since they “know” that the wider community does not appreciate a family which has practiced intermarriage. Further, children of intermarriage couples also face difficulty in finding a spouse, according to older generation respondents.
- 36 Dowry is another crucial “cultural element” in the marriage market in most South Asian regions and religions (Caplan 1984; Srinivasan and Lee 2004). In fact, the practice of dowry has been observed among South Asian immigrants even in the West (Bhopal 1997). In the Pahadi communities in Nepal, instances of dowry are less severe and dowry-related violence is rare. In the southern plains, many parents will invest in the education of sons because higher education also means a higher amount of dowry. The Hill dominated Nepali-language media often highlights dowry-related violence in the plains, projecting the Madhesi as culturally “conservative.” During their courtships, Pahadi women were aware of the issue and often feared dowry-related violence despite the men assuring them that they would forgo the dowry for the “sake of love.” Dowry remains a major issue.
- 37 One reason parents opposed intermarriage was precisely because of the prospect of not getting any dowry.²⁰ Most Madhesi men we interviewed were educated and economically independent at the time of their marriage. Education and a job would have increased their dowry value. Shyam recalled that his *mamaji* (the maternal uncle), in particular, became “very sad and upset” that he was going to marry without dowry, especially since there were a number of marriage proposals from his own community with generous offers. He recalled:

My *mamaji* once said to my father that you are allowing your son to marry without dowry after educating him to this high level...you are giving away the buffalo you have raised all the years when it is about to give you milk.

Here Shyam’s *mamaji* compares him to an adult buffalo, ready to be milked. In contrast, in Madhesi society, a woman is usually described as a plant which flowers in someone

else's garden. Shyam's father, influenced by his *mama*, resisted his son's proposal for some time before giving in.

- 38 Mithun's parents were worried that he would not bring home any dowry. He mobilized his social resources and his *jjaji* came to his rescue. He recalled his *jjaji* telling his parents, "How does dowry matter, even if they give it to their daughter? The only thing that matters is a good bride." Tina said that her in-laws made indirect references to dowry whenever relatives visited their home by stating "...*dudh na dine gai ko laat sahindaina* (it is not necessary to tolerate a kick from a non-lactating cow)." Pubai similarly believes that the "real" reason her parents-in-law raised the issue of her lower caste was because she did not bring home any dowry.
- 39 Like the caste system, dowry works in the context of complex social expectations and a web of social practices. Many parents of boys in the southern plains had already spent large sums of dowry when they married their daughters off and expected to be compensated when their sons married. Mithun's father precisely raised this point when he argued:

I have spent beyond my capacity in dowry when I married my daughters off.
So how can I not expect a return when my son, on whom I have spent so much money in education, is going to get married?

- 40 Thus, for many parents, when their sons marry, expecting dowry appears as fair game. Further, Madhesi men often find it difficult to reject a dowry offer even if they do not endorse the practice. According to our respondents, if a "qualified" man, particularly one who is educated and has a regular salaried job, rejects a dowry offer, his defiance is interpreted negatively and is thought of as indicating some "deep flaw"—physical deformity, for example—in him. These expectations and practices make dowry a complex institutional fact, hard to change through individual will and effort.
- 41 We noted above that Madhesi men valued Pahadi women for the latter's assertiveness and frankness. This stereotypical image, however, turns out to be problematic for parents-in-law and kin. They fear that an argumentative, assertive, and outgoing daughter-in-law means that they will lose control of finance and household management, which also has implications regarding their security in old age and their relationships with close kin and the community at large. For Pahadi women, they were in fear they might be faced with "control" by their in-laws and the community at large as stories of "conservative" and "controlling" Madhesi widely circulate in the Nepali Hills.
- 42 Pubai said that her parents-in-law did not like her husband sending her money from Malaysia and her independent decisions regarding household affairs. Shyam recalls his *mamaji* telling his father: "*bhaishi ta bhaishi ; nau haath ke pagho gel* (You have lost both the buffalo and its nine-foot-long rope)" suggesting that the Pahadi daughter-in-law was likely to get out of parental control and that the son might come under her influence. An old woman whose son was married to a Pahadi said in Maithili: "*paharniya putauh, phoir detau dhauha* (A Pahadi daughter-in-law won't give you enough to eat)." This saying was quite widespread among the older generation in the Sitapur region. She was not happy with her Pahadi daughter-in-law, whom she characterized as *dhakadbi* (bullying). Thus, in sharp contrast to their sons, the parents of Madhesi men did not appreciate the purported frankness and assertiveness in their Pahadi daughters-in-law.

- 43 Caste, dowry, and the role of a daughter-in-law thus became major issues for parents when these men and women sought approval for intermarriage from their parents and these issues were significant in 9 out of the 12 cases we investigated. But the remaining three cases stand out. Shyam and Mithun could convince their parents to attend their wedding rituals and ceremonies. We also noted that Rajiv was accepted by his parents-in-law soon after they had eloped. Together, these three cases can be termed “successful” in that parents on both sides are on good terms with the couples and they do not report any issue in their extended families. These successful cases raise a puzzle: why did some families cross the boundaries of caste, culture, and community rather easily?
- 44 Answering this question requires a separate and more comprehensive study. Though unfortunately we could not access the Pahadi parents, based on our interviews, we can make a few tentative observations. In the three successful cases, the women came from Pahadi Brahmin caste and the men’s families had a lower caste background. This fact only adds further puzzle however. Before a new Act officially abolished the caste system in Nepal in 1963, hypogamous marriages had been dealt with severely (Höfer 2004). One would thus expect the woman’s parents to oppose the marriage, but that did not happen in the three cases. One can argue that this was because the caste system in the Hills is weaker than in the plains and that the Pahadis are more “liberal” than the Madhesi (Bista 1991; Sharma 1978), but why did the parents of Hill women not accept the marriages in other cases? We thus have to look beyond caste, culture, and ethnicity to understand the successful crossing of the barriers of caste and culture.
- 45 In interviews, a few older generation Madhesi respondents suspected the “motives” of Pahadi parents and women in marrying a Madhesi man. According to one respondent, parents of Pahadi women “engineer” intermarriages whenever they find an *educated* and *employed* Madhesi man. The response of this Madhesi parent is an oversimplification and exaggeration, but our observation shows that they have a point. The three successful cases show just that—Pahadi parents are likely to accept an intermarriage if the son-in-law is well educated, has a regular job, and comes from a relatively wealthy family background. All three men in the successful cases fulfil these criteria, compared to the men in unsuccessful or “troubled” cases.
- 46 This crude comparison indicates that socio-economic status and class positions work as compensation for ethnic and cultural differences to some extent since voluntary intermarriage also means that the concerned parties consider each other to be “socially equal” (Kalmijn 1998). This conclusion again underscores the major point of this paper that the changing economy and the growing salience of class and cash income are crucial in the new practices of courtship and intermarriages in contemporary South Asia.
- 47 Finally, De Neve (2016) has documented cases in South India in which couples almost regretted their decisions since their love marriages jeopardized the potential material support from their in-laws and kin. The material support was crucial for the men to fulfil their aspirations of upward mobility and entrepreneurship in the post-liberalization Indian environment. None of our respondents regretted their decisions in our study, however. This may have to do with the type of respondents we have in our study: in contrast to De Neve’s respondents, individual and couples in our study were less ambitious and aimed at a rather modest goal of a regular cash income or a salaried job. Most had achieved their goals. Second, married couples might have different and

more moderate expectations from their in-laws and kin in Nepal than in India. Even Pubai, who had lost the support of her parents and kin and appeared visibly distressed and frustrated, said that she did not regret her decision.

Conclusion

48 This paper has focused on intermarriages between Madhesi men and Pahadi women in southern Nepal. We discussed how these couples met, how they negotiated their marriages, and how culture and caste complicated their journey to marital lives. We have argued that a new form of subjectivity that values individual choices and self-fulfillment is emerging among the younger generation. Major changes in the past decades in the state, economy, and culture provide a context in which this subjectivity finds a home. In particular, we pointed out that the power of the younger generation, relative to their parents, has grown significantly and that they are able to exercise considerable choice and agency over the parental generation. On the other hand, we also showed that the agency exercised by the men and women was embedded in their culture, community, and society. The younger generation not only took several cultural norms for granted but also had to negotiate with, and accommodate, “traditional” forces and practices. In particular, dowry, caste and gender norms, which are often depicted as “social evils” in South Asia, are still powerful forces. In line with previous research (Ahearn 2001; Basnet 2015; Liechty 2003, 2010; Rankin 2004; Yamamoto 1983), we argue that Nepal is at the crossroads of change and articulates its capitalist modernity in ambiguous and contradictory ways.

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NOTES

1. Ahearn (2001) has reported a variant of arranged marriage in which parents in western Nepal seek the "consent" of their son and daughter after they have decided a marital alliance. In practice, consent means little or nothing especially for women.
2. No study documenting the extent of intermarriage in Nepal exists. We believe that intermarriages between high castes and ethnic, tribal, "middle caste" groups in the Hills are far more extensive than between the Madhesis and Pahadis (Caplan 1977; Basnet 2015). A few prominent Madhesi leaders such as Jaya Prakash Gupta, Bijay Gachhadar and Hridayesh Tripathi are known to have married Pahadi women.
3. The British, in the 19th century, for example, viewed the Hill Nepalis as considerably less burdened by "excessive custom" as compared to the Indians (Berreman 1963; Lakier 2005).
4. Although Nepal had a new Constitution in 2015 and elections for the federal, state and municipal governments were held in 2016 and 2017, several demands of the Madhesis remain unmet. Madhesi political parties still demand a constitutional reform for greater ethnic autonomy and rights.
5. Migration from Nepal has grown rapidly since the mid-1990s. About 17 % of the country's adult male and 2 % of its female population were involved in migration and the remittances contributed about a 22 per cent to GDP in 2008 (Maharjan, Bauer and Knerr 2013)
6. Nepal's famed 1854 legal code prescribed severe punishment for hypogamy but it allowed hypergamy so long as the boundary between "water-acceptable" and water-unacceptable "untouchable" castes was maintained (Höfer 2004). Children from hypergamous unions were upgraded to the caste of the father. Brahmin men were downgraded to Kshatriya or some form of "impure" Brahmin status. Nepal implemented a new legal code in 1963 which abolished caste-based unequal citizenship, but in practice, caste remains a powerful force both in the Hills and plains. In contemporary Nepal, courtships and intermarriages between "untouchables" and "clean castes," like in India, are viewed as being severely problematic and often elicit violent reactions and sanctions, especially from members of "clean caste" parties (Kansakar and Ghimire 2009). Investigating inter-caste marriages in Nepal's Western Hills in the late 1960s, Caplan (1977) found that so long as "clean castes" were involved, both hypergamous and hypogamous intermarriages were acceptable.
7. All individual and most place names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

8. Since the research was conducted in the southern plains, we could not access the parents of any of the Pahadi wives. Any information about the parents of the wives presented in the paper came from the interviews with the couples.
9. In Nepal, as in most developing countries, people prefer jobs in the non-agricultural sector ; in fact, both scholars and state policy makers idealize the non-agriculture sector over the traditional agricultural one (Graner 2001; Skeldon 2002). As is the case of the economy in general, Nepal's agriculture sector has stagnated and it offers the lowest wages and little or no prestige (Graner 2001).
10. These stereotypical images of Madhesi women may have something to do with the fact that our respondents came from middle and high-caste backgrounds. Historically, and in the contemporary South Asia in general, Dalit and tribal women have enjoyed greater control over their lives and experienced a lesser degree of patriarchy (Chakravarti 1995; Jones 1977).
11. Here, this Madhesi Nepali man is following the popular script, long observed in India, that fair skin is beautiful. In India, darker skin is often associated with lower class and low caste "untouchable" groups (Beteille [1965] 1996). The advertisement industry, matrimonial columns, and popular media routinely glorify a fairer complexion, taking advantage of people's obsession with lighter skin tones (Jha and Adelman 2009; Shevde 2008).
12. The men's behaviour need not be interpreted as an instance of unquestioning adherence to some timeless cultural ideal in that men also had deep material interests since they, not women, inherited parental property. In addition, men usually leave their wives with their parents when they go out of their village or town for work and employment.
13. The Newars are natives of Kathmandu valley but they are found all over Nepal. They practice a mix of Hinduism and Buddhism. They are officially recognized as an indigenous ethnic group, but like other Hindu groups, the Newari society is cast-ridden (Gellner and Quigley 1995).
14. Pubai, however, said that her mother once came to meet her in a nearby town. She talks with her younger sister over the phone regularly.
15. Nepal's Marriage Registration Act (1971) does not require the couple to declare their castes and faiths. It also has a provision of stringent punishment for erring officials if they refuse to register a marriage within a week. Like in India (Chakravarti 2005; Chowdhry 2004), ambiguities in the age certificate remains and sometimes parents try to take advantage of them. Only a systematic study can say conclusively about the behaviour of the courts and state officials. Our opinion is that compared to India, Nepali state officials are more likely to honour the choice of the runaway couple. Even in India, scholars have noted a few cases in which courts have taken the side of the couple (Chakravarti 2005).
16. The same can be said of the parents of women, whom we could not interview, since *kanyadan* (gift of the virgin bride) is considered as one of the major duties of Hindu parents in South Asia (Chakravarti 1995, 2005).
17. Here we by no means imply that these concerns are absent among the Hill Hindus. Since we did not have access to the parents of the Pahadi wives, we do not have data on their views and feelings.
18. The 1854 legal code accorded a lower status to the Newars than Hill high caste groups in Nepal, but they were among the "clean castes," well above the so-called "untouchables."
19. Kayasthas in North India have successfully claimed high caste status beginning from the second half of the nineteenth century (Jaffrelot 2003).
20. None of the family members used the term dowry ; instead, they used terms like *daan*, *uphar*, *bidai*, and so on.

ABSTRACTS

In South Asia, marriages are overwhelmingly endogamous. In recent years, new forms of self-initiated marriages, such as love-marriages and love-arranged marriages, are beginning to emerge among the younger generation. In these new forms, young people exercise considerable choice and agency; however, when the couple crosses caste and ethnic boundaries, parents and kin often take the defiance of the younger generation as instances of dereliction of duty and transgression of family and community values. Cases of intermarriage, thus, offer a unique opportunity to investigate the social and cultural changes a society is undergoing. Based on qualitative research, conducted in southern Nepal, this paper examines the ways *Madhesi* (plains dwellers) men and *Pahadi* (hill dwellers) women enter into courtship and negotiate their marriages. We argue that new forms of subjectivity emphasizing individual choice and agency have begun to emerge among the younger generation in Nepal—and South Asia in general. The new subjectivity has unfolded in tandem with structural transformations of the economy, the state, and the culture.

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Keywords: intermarriage, Nepal, South Asia, caste, ethnicity, love marriage

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